

FACTSHEET

Veterinary Services

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

February 2001

Controlling Cattle Fever Ticks

The rugged cowboys that dominated the American television screen in the 1950's may have faded away, but real cowboys still ride the range—make that the river banks—of the Rio Grande. These cowboys work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and are looking for the ticks that cause cattle fever, another term for babesiosis.

Known as "tick riders," these cowboys first appeared in 1906 as part of the Cattle Fever Tick Eradication Program (CFTEP), one of the first cooperative State–Federal eradication efforts. Through the CFTEP, the tick riders helped eradicate the existing infestation of cattle fever ticks in the United States and prevented the introduction of new cattle fever ticks from Mexico. They did so by using horseback patrol and systematic quarantines along the Rio Grande River. By 1943, the tick riders had helped eradicate the two species of cattle fever ticks from the United States, with the exception of a permanent quarantine zone between Texas and Mexico.

The ticks of interest to the APHIS tick riders are the cattle fever tick (*Boophilus annulatus*) and the southern cattle tick (*Boophilus microplus*). These pests are responsible for the spread of a severe and often fatal disease of cattle, commonly known as Texas or cattle fever. The disease, spread through a parasite that destroys red blood cells, was eradicated from the United States by CFTEP between 1906 and 1961.

Background

Spanish colonists first brought both types of cattle fever ticks and cattle fever disease to the United States through the introduction of infested cattle. Currently, both types of ticks infest most tropical and subtropical areas of the Western Hemisphere. They frequently are found in the part of Texas that borders on infested parts of Mexico and are occasionally found in California. Florida had outbreaks of cattle ticks in the 1950's and in 1960.

Clinical Signs

Cattle with the acute form of tick fever (generally contracted during the summer) develop high temperatures (107° or 108° F) and stand with their heads lowered and backs arched. They experience a loss of appetite, constipation followed by diarrhea, and decreased milk production. "Red water," or bloodstained urine, is common. Death usually comes within 3 or 4 days after fever develops.

Cattle affected with the chronic form of cattle fever (contracted in late autumn and winter) develop a mild fever and stop eating and chewing their cud. They also develop anemia and lose weight rapidly. The chronic form of the disease lasts for many weeks. Some deaths occur, but most animals recover gradually.

Surviving animals may display nervousness known as "tick poverty" or "tick worry"—they become weak, stunted, and anemic from the continuous loss of blood. Ticks can reduce the weight of a 1,000-pound steer by 200 pounds in a year. Infected cattle frequently have relapses 3 to 6 weeks after their temperatures return to normal and become susceptible to other diseases or secondary infections.

In summer, the incubation period (the time from when an animal becomes infected until it first shows disease signs) is usually 10 to 15 days after the infected larvae, or seed ticks, begin feeding on the animal. In winter, it may take as long as 90 days.

Ticks' Life Cycle

Cattle fever ticks spend the early part of their lives on the ground. Eventually they infest cattle, or—occasionally—horses, mules, sheep, goats, or deer. The ticks must have blood from an animal host to complete their life cycles.

Newly hatched seed ticks, or larvae, are barely visible to the unaided eye. These waxy brown, six-legged ticks crawl up grass or plants where they wait for an animal to pass by. If ticks do not find a host, they eventually die of starvation. In summer, seed ticks may starve after 3 to 4 months; in colder periods, they may survive for 6 months.

Usually seed ticks first attach themselves to soft skin inside the animal's thigh, flanks, and forelegs or along the belly and brisket. There, they suck blood, or engorge. Then these ticks molt twice: seed ticks

become tiny, white, eight-legged nymphs; after engorging about a week, nymphs molt to become adults. Many adult ticks are olive green; others are mottled yellow or olive brown.

Eradication

Cattle fever has caused enormous losses to the U.S. cattle industry in the past. Before the nationwide eradication program began in 1906, direct and indirect economic losses were estimated to be \$130.5 million (which would be approximately \$3 billion today). If the ticks had not been eradicated from the United States, the cattle industry's losses from ticks could amount to approximately \$1 billion annually.

Current Activities

The tick riders, working through CFTEP, still patrol the Rio Grande river on horseback. The highly successful program currently consists of 57 inspectors, 7 supervisors, and a director of field operations, with 2 assistants. The quarantine or "buffer" zone extends over 900 miles from Del Rio, TX, to the Gulf of Mexico, and is 200 yards to 6 miles wide. Outbreaks outside the zone are rare. Premises found to be infested with cattle fever ticks are placed under quarantine for 6 to 9 months, depending on the time of year.

APHIS tick riders detect and apprehend any illegally entered (stray or smuggled) Mexican livestock or native livestock that have crossed into Mexico and returned. APHIS officials inspect and dip all native livestock being moved within or out of the buffer zone in pesticides that kill ticks without injuring the animals.

Although a single treatment kills all the ticks on an animal, it will not assure eradication because it does not prevent reinfestation. Only long-range programs can rid an area of ticks. For this reason, APHIS dips cattle at regular intervals for at least 1 year following direct or presumed contact with the pest.

Without these controls, cattle fever ticks would reinfest areas of the United States that have warm climates.

If Your Cattle Have Ticks

If you suspect that your cattle have cattle fever ticks or you do not know the species infesting your cattle, ask an APHIS tick inspector or your local veterinarian to have the ticks identified and give you information about control or eradication. Each suspect animal should be chute-restrained so an experienced person can make a dry-scratch inspection. State and Federal inspectors regularly examine cattle throughout the infested buffer area until all cattle fever ticks are eradicated.

Chemical dips—when properly used—kill ticks on animals without injuring the animals. You may obtain the names of the permitted dips from your veterinarian, State or Federal disease control officials, or the Federal veterinarian in charge of your State. Every animal in every infested and exposed herd must be treated.

Getting the Word Out

The ultimate goal of the CFTEP is to completely eliminate cattle fever ticks from the United States. Success of the program not only prevents exposure of U.S. livestock to babesiosis but allows the annual importation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican cattle, a large number of which are presumed to be infected with the disease, while protecting the U.S. cattle industry.

As part of its increased surveillance activities, APHIS is continuing an education effort to inform U.S. cattle producers and veterinarians about this pest and the disease that it causes. For more information, contact:

USDA, APHIS, Veterinary Services
National Center for Import/Export
Animals Program
Telephone: (301) 734-8170
or
USDA, APHIS, Veterinary Services
Emergency Services
4700 River Road, Unit 41
Riverdale, MD 20737-1231
Telephone: (301) 734-8073

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotope, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.